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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [GM](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: LAFONTAINE STEPS ASIDE IN SAARLAND CAMPAIGN

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Saarland Social Democratic Party (SPD) selected chairman Heiko Maas to challenge Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Minister-President (M-P) Peter Mueller in the September 2004 state elections. Maas' nomination to challenge the popular Mueller ended long speculation that the party would choose Oskar Lafontaine (former Saarland M-P and later federal Finance Minister). According to press reports, the national SPD leadership backed Maas even though polls favored Lafontaine (overall, the SPD trails the CDU in Saarland by 21 points). Lafontaine, an outspoken voice of the SPD's left wing, has a long history of publicly challenging Chancellor Schroeder on a number of issues (including economic reforms), and the chancellor was allegedly wary that Lafontaine could have used the nomination to widen his own power base. Observers expect the SPD to gain ground in Saarland by next September. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Following a lengthy internal debate, the Saarland SPD recently chose Heiko Maas to run against the popular Mueller in the upcoming elections. According to media reports, the party chose Maas under pressure from Schroeder, who was reluctant to run the risk that Lafontaine would use the nomination to seek to re-build his power base in the national SPD. Lafontaine enjoys strong name recognition (in contrast to the young Maas, a relative unknown) and remains a popular figure in Saarland and among left-wing activists.

3. (SBU) Maas denied reports that Schroeder pressured him to run, and SPD contacts insist that Lafontaine never disputed Maas' right (as SPD chief for Saarland) to have first right of refusal at being the standard bearer. Although Lafontaine was and remains a national figure, Maas is clearly the "establishment" candidate with the solid support of the party apparatus in Saarland. Maas' staff predict that Lafontaine will set aside his own political ambitions and follow the party line, including campaigning for Maas and the SPD.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: Party insiders say Maas likely will pursue a strategy similar to Schroeder's 1998 national campaign, when Lafontaine secured left-wing votes through his support of the SPD ticket while Schroeder attracted the centrist element. The SPD needs to energize its rank-and-file if it is to have any hope to break the CDU's absolute majority in Saarland, and the key to success is high voter turnout. If, as in recent elections, SPD voters turn out in low numbers, the SPD will lose. A good contact, Maas has organizational and political savvy that belies his young age (33), and our many meetings suggest he could be a pro-American force along the lines of Kurt Beck (the SPD Minister-President of neighboring Rheinland-Pfalz).

5. (SBU) The SPD is at a low ebb nationally and has lost 11 mayoral elections in Saarland since Mueller assumed power in 1999. Election observers expect the SPD to gain ground in Saarland, where the political mainstream lies to the left of center. With centrist Maas in front and vigorous support from Lafontaine -- together with expected gains by the Greens and a weak showing by the FDP (Free Democrats), who may not cross the five percent threshold -- the SPD/Greens have an outside chance to unseat the CDU in the September 2004 Landtag elections. END COMMENT.

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